

TRADITION CAN TRIP YOUR WORSHIP!

Today's Text: Matt. 15: 1-20

Extracts:

Then the scribes and Pharisees who were from Jerusalem came to Jesus, saying, "Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread." He answered and said to them, "Why do you also trespass the commandments of God because of your tradition? ... Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying: "These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honour Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me, and in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" [Matt. 15: 1-2, 7-9]

Reverend Father Alberto Curié was a popular Catholic priest in Florida, USA, where he was in charge of the Miami Beach church.¹ He headed the archdiocese's Radio Paz (Radio Peace) that broadcasts throughout the Americas and in Spain. For the quality of relationship advice that he gave to listeners, Father Alberto was nicknamed "Father Oprah" after the well-known American talk show hostess, Oprah Winfrey. He was also a great defender of celibacy, the Catholic Church's requirement for its entire clergy not to marry. However, in May 2009, a Spanish-language magazine published pictures of Rev. Alberto kissing and embracing a woman on a beach. The church removed him from heading the Miami Beach church. But, in a ceremony on Thursday, May 28, 2009, he was received into the Episcopal Church, the American branch of the Anglican Communion, which allows its priests to marry. He plans to marry the woman he was caught kissing and it has been discovered that they had actually been in a serious relationship for several years. In Father Alberto's words, "I have struggled ---between my love for God and my love for the Church and my love for service."

The two Christian denominations in that story both accept the same Christian doctrine as summarized in the Apostles' Creed. Yet one disciplined its priest for breach of its tradition and another one grabbed him. What is going on here? Is Father Alberto playing the victim of tradition or he was a hypocrite who did not practise what he preached? How supportive are our traditions (religious or cultural) to our desire for true worship? Such and more are the issues that we shall examine in this week's study.

¹ Story based on "Miami's 'Father Oprah' switches churches," The Associated Press, Thurs. May 28, 2009; <http://www.msnbc.com/id/30986003/>

1. Background: Jewish tradition trips true worship

Some Jewish leaders (scribes and Pharisees) from Jerusalem came to Jesus and charged, “Why do Your disciples transgress *the tradition of the elders*? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.” Jesus replied, “Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? For God commanded, saying, ‘Honour your father and your mother,’ and ‘He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.’ But you say, ‘Whoever says to his father or mother, “Whatever profit you might have received from me is a gift to God”- then he need not honour his father or mother.’ Thus, *you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition*” [Matt. 15: 1-6].

Tradition can be defined as precepts handed down from generation to generation. Whether it is an ethnic group or country or race, school, club or church, every group has its own rules and regulations, written or oral, that are meant to promote discipline and an enabling environment for the achievement or perpetuation of group goals or interests. For example, with reference to the tradition of Holy Communion, Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, “I *received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you*, that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread” [1 Cor. 11: 23-25], and the rest you already know from the Gospels.

There is nothing wrong *per se* with tradition unless it contradicts the word of God. That was why Jesus took pains to lay the ground rules for the desirable link between tradition and true worship. He called the Pharisees and scribes “hypocrites” and quoted the prophecy of Isaiah concerning them, which says, “These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honour Me with their lips, but *their heart is far from Me; and in vain they worship Me*, teaching as doctrine the commandments of men” [vv. 7-9]. Since true lovers communicate mostly with the heart, it follows that the heart that is far from God cannot relate to Him. Certainly, you do not want to worship God in vain. Therefore, it is important to know what true worship is and how your traditional values and practices, both within and outside your church, will promote it.

When Jesus encountered a woman at the well in the Samaritan city of Sychar, He defined true worship as follows [Jn 4: 21, 23, 24]:

The hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and in truth.

From that, we can see the evolution of true worship over time as follows:

- a) *Under the Law of Moses*

To receive the Ten Commandments, Moses went up to Mount Sinai [Ex. 19: 3]. There, God also gave him the precepts and regulations to govern the people's conduct and worship, as you can find in the books of Exodus, and Leviticus. God even named and anointed the artisans that would build the tabernacle of meeting, the ark of the Testimony and the mercy seat as well as the vessels to be in the place of worship [Ex. 31: 1-6]. Out of that experience came the tradition of the Jews that they passed from generation to generation. That is the way of life that the Jewish leaders insisted on Jesus and His disciples maintaining or honouring.

However, history has shown that going to the mountain to meet God has not saved the Jews from captivity and exile. It turned out that they had paid more attention to their traditional worship rituals than to obeying and serving God. Today, Mount Sinai is in Saudi Arabia [Gal. 4: 25], under the control of Moslems!

b) *In the temple of Solomon in Jerusalem*

When the children of Israel finally settled down in the Promised Land, Solomon built a temple in Jerusalem in accordance with the specifications given by God. After the dedication of that temple, God appeared to Solomon in a dream and told him [2 Chron. 7: 14-16]:

If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray, and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land. Now My eyes will be open and My ears attentive to prayer made in this place, for now I have chosen and sanctified this house, that My name may be there forever, and My eyes and My heart will be there perpetually.

Of course, the people did not humble themselves. They did evil in the sight of God. In due course, they were taken to exile in Babylon. The temple was destroyed. Even though it was rebuilt before the birth of Jesus, it was later completely razed by the Romans. Today, the relic of that temple is the Wailing Wall where Jews still post written prayer petitions. The top level of the site is now a mosque, the second holiest site for Moslems (after Mecca)!

c) *The Church of Christ*

The Church of Christ was born on Pentecost Sunday, after the Holy Spirit had descended on the disciples [Acts 2: 1-3]. On that day alone, about three thousand people received Christ and were baptized, "and they continued steadfastly in the *apostles' doctrine and fellowship*, in the

breaking of bread and in *prayers*. The fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles” [vv. 41-43]. The believers were together and had things in common. They continued “daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house... with gladness and simplicity of heart” [vv. 44-46]. It was in the comfort of the Holy Spirit that the church multiplied [Acts 9: 31]. The early followers of Christ exhibited such qualities before the Gentiles in Antioch that they began to call them “Christians” [Acts 11: 26].

Nevertheless, the early church faced a cultural identity crisis. All the apostles and most of the disciples were Jews. To adopt the tradition under the Law of Moses would make circumcision compulsory for the Gentile converts. However, with Paul’s persuasive arguments [Acts 15: 1-21] and Peter’s personal experience with Cornelius, the centurion who had received the Holy Spirit without circumcision [Acts 10:44-48], the Church Council adopted the Christian tradition that “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for (all are) one in Christ Jesus” [Gal. 3: 8]. Emphasis was placed on true worship characterized by holy living [Acts 15: 22-35]. That is the tradition that ought to be found in each Christian place of worship today. Let us find out your experience in your place of worship.

2. What has tradition done to your worship?

Over time, Christianity has been influenced by dominant secular cultures. For example, Western civilization (ancient Greek and Roman, and modern European and American) and the traditional cultures of Asia and Africa have made their mark on the modern Christian church. Consequently, we now have so many denominations and denominational traditions have bred the following tendencies among fellow believers in Christ:²

a) *Churches have become exclusive clubs!*

The version of Bible you use, whether you pray sitting, standing or kneeling, with your eyes closed or opened, how to confess your sins, and on what days of the week and what times to come for service, or what even constitutes “good conduct” are all derived from denominational rules and regulations. Consequently, churches have become exclusive and segregated clubs.

Even in the early church, such tendencies had begun to show up. For example, the church in Corinth experienced contentions because some claimed to be followers of Paul or Apollos or Peter or Christ. Paul had to remind them that only Christ was crucified on the cross [1 Cor. 1: 10-13]!

² Based on “Churchianity at war with Christianity,” *Weekly Bible Study Series*, Vol. 4 No. 6: 9 March 2003; pp. 3-5]

Paul also had to remind the Ephesians, “There is *one body*, and *one Spirit*; even as you are called in *one hope* of your calling; *one Lord*, *one faith*, *one baptism*, *one God*” [Eph. 4: 4-5].

b) *All denominations suffer from superiority complex!*

You easily sense the air of superiority that each denomination pumps into the heads of its members. Whoever worships God other than we do here is going to hell! Our interpretation of the word of God is the only correct one. We measure church growth, not by the number of new converts from other faiths (such as Islam or Hinduism, etc) but the number we can draw away from other denominations, especially those we consider to be keen rivals!

Paul withstood Peter in Antioch over his condescending attitude towards the Gentiles. Before some Jews sent by James, came from Jerusalem, Peter ate with the Gentiles, considered unclean by the Jews because they were uncircumcised. However, as soon as the Jerusalem team, made up of all Jews, came to Antioch, Peter withdrew and separated himself, “fearing those who were of the circumcision.” Even Barnabas and some other Jews followed Peter to be “carried away with hypocrisy.” Paul openly rebuked them and insisted, “A man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Christ Jesus. . . . I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me” [Gal. 2: 11-20]. Paul refused to be tripped by the tradition of his people.

c) *There is absence of Christian love or life*

Ordinarily, there is nothing wrong with being a member of an exclusive club that exudes an air of superiority if it also radiates Christian love or holy living. Within each modern church, the discontent among members will even amaze you. Divisions may be caused by immorality, mismanagement of church funds, backbiting and doctrinal error, which are swept under the carpet instead of being resolved. Some people prefer not to see. Those who see and raise eyebrows are branded rebels that have ambitions to go and set up their own churches. Outside of the church, there may be no social interaction among members. In the absence of the Holy Spirit that can make Jesus real in the daily lives of such members, pretended piety becomes the banner, and “Thou shalt not be caught” becomes the only commandment that is obeyed by all! How can such a congregation teach or spread love to non-believers?

The word of God says, “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. . . . If God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been

perfected in us” [1 Jn 4: 10-12]. Jesus taught His disciples, “By this all will know that you are My disciples, *if you have love for one another*” [Jn 13: 35].

Clearly, we learn from the forgoing that tradition, whether secular, cultural or religious, is meant to promote or maintain standards that society or church considers worthy to uphold. However, because human beings cannot be predicted, tradition can easily stand in the way of true worship in the following ways (among others):

- . We can easily become *hypocrites*- prescribing to others what they must do which we ourselves do not follow or obey. We become hardhearted and uncaring because we know that we will not apply the rules to our conduct or examples. If we always choose before others and take the front seats at assemblies, how can we feel for the less privileged and the needy who have no where to sit?
- We can *play the ostrich*- burying our heads in the sand and seeing nothing. For example, in the West, most members of the church want to be politically correct. So, they acquiesce when their leaders call legal protection of sinful acts (such as abortion and same-sex marriage) civil rather than *evil rights*. In Africa, where there is respect for elders, they are not bold enough to speak integrity and truth to people in authority even when such leaders abuse their office.
- Or we can play the *ritualist*- very busy doing God’s work as prescribed by our denominational doctrine, but without a personal involvement in the work of God in that church. Yet, deep down in our hearts, we harbour envy, bitterness and vengeance against others.

3. Conclusion: True worship is a relationship, not a religion!

You are a hypocrite, no matter the high rank you hold in your church or for how long you have called yourself a believer, if your mind is still full of “evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness (and) blasphemies” [Matt. 15: 19].

God wants you to develop an *intimate personal relationship* with Him through His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. No matter how hard you walk in the tradition of your church, you can never satisfy Him as long as such tradition does not enable or promote that desirable personal relationship. By their fruits we shall know them. When God sees your fruits of love, joy, a forgiving spirit, patience and perseverance, among others [Gal. 5: 21], He will know that you have moved from death to life. He will adopt you as the brother/sister of His Son, Jesus, and you will qualify to call Him, “Abba! Father!” [Rom. 8: 14-17].

Tradition can trip your worship- if you let it!